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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001336

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TAGS: [EDU](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IQ](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: TOUGH CROWD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GHARDAIA

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Welcomed by a lively group of 250 students, the Ambassador spoke December 18 at the University of Ghardaia on the importance of youth participation in elections. His remarks were met with critical comments from faculty and students alike regarding U.S. policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the war in Iraq. Despite the skeptical posture of the audience, it appeared that the students understood the effect youth participation had in the recent U.S. elections and many seemed impressed by the Ambassador's openness in discussing the way the American people achieved change through peaceful, democratic means. The lecture followed by a day the Iraqi shoe-throwing incident that has transformed the journalist into a folk hero. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The Ambassador's appearance at the University of Ghardaia (in south-central Algeria) was the major outreach activity of his December 16-18 visit to the region (other meetings will be reported septel). His visit was the first by a U.S. Ambassador since Professor Mohamed Halilat took over as university rector in early 2008. The university was founded in 2003 to consolidate several tertiary academic institutes in Ghardaia. With a current student population of 3200 (65 percent of whom are female), the university is still working to establish various faculties to offer the full range of degree programs. For example, the university does not yet have a foreign language department, thus the students' study of English is limited. During the Ambassador's introductory call on the rector, several members of the university's senior staff highlighted the need for better English training and for exchanges with foreign universities.

¶3. (U) Given that the Ambassador's visit came the day before the beginning of the midyear holiday, the turnout of more than 250 students was a genuine display of interest at an institution that rarely receives high-level visitors. The Ambassador spoke for 20 minutes in Arabic about the role of youth participation in the U.S. presidential election. He discussed the impact of new technologies and the grassroots campaigns that in many ways put the youth of America more directly in touch with the candidates than ever before.

¶4. (C) When the Ambassador asked for questions from students in the audience, a history professor was quick to take the microphone first and comment that "a history of rule by white men (in the United States) has led to nothing but black

results." He went on to say that the United States has brought suffering to Iraqi and Palestinian children and that the people of Iraq were better off under Saddam Hussein because they "still had their dignity." The Ambassador responded that he had served in the Middle East for more than 30 years, including in Iraq, and he pointed out the fact that no one had brought greater suffering to the Iraqi people than Saddam Hussein. The professor responded by saying that he could not accept the Ambassador's response and left the auditorium, followed by a number of his students who we believe were coached before the event.

15. (C) A young woman asked what the Ambassador thought about the incident the day before in Baghdad when a journalist threw his shoes at President Bush and whether it was a sign of freedom of opinion in the Arab world. He responded that he knew the gesture was an insult in Arab culture and it was certainly perceived as one by Americans. He said insults and protests, like the professor's walkout, may make us feel a little better for a little while, but after that we have to ask ourselves if we have managed to actually change anything with such gestures. Returning to his earlier remarks, the Ambassador stated that the students in the audience were the future leaders of their country. If they want to affect real change, what they should do is stay engaged, and participate in the political process, and vote, rather than simply boycotting and staging protests. This is what had just happened in the United States, and the youth of America had been a key factor in what had clearly been a vote for change.

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16. (U) Another student questioned why nuclear weapons must be restricted to an elite group of countries. The Ambassador responded that nuclear proliferation is a difficult issue, but also a potentially dangerous and destabilizing one that must be governed through international agreements. The Ambassador continued by noting that President-elect Obama has stated that it is not from the power of our weapons that the United States derives its strength, but from the power of its ideas, the fundamental values of freedom and democracy.

17. (C) The last question was posed by a student who wondered what the U.S. position was on the recent amendment to the Algerian constitution which eliminated term limits. In responding, the Ambassador stated that it is for each country to decide the contents of their constitution and he noted that the United States had done it both ways. George Washington had resisted appeals to run for a third term. But in the conditions of the Great Depression and the Second World War, Franklin Roosevelt had been elected to four terms.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Ironically, the professor's walkout helped underline the Ambassador's basic message about the importance and value of political participation. While the University of Ghardaia students were not a group easily convinced of the value of U.S. policies, the impressive turnout for the talk and the active engagement of the students in posing questions was remarkable in that it showed the students were both interested in the topics and felt free to express their views openly. The visit also showed an appetite for programming and English-language education at universities further afield in Algeria, which can often yield exponential returns given the rarity of foreign visitors.

PEARCE